

# ServantReading

## A Humble Minister's Courageous Stand against Ecclesiastical Tyranny A Review Article

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**By Robert T. Holda**

*Standing Against Tyranny: The Life and Legacy of Arthur Perkins*, by Rev. Brian L. De Jong. Independently Published, 2023, 516 pages, hardcover \$26.99, paperback, \$19.99.

The origin story of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, as seen through a study of the life of J. Gresham Machen, is familiar to most *Ordained Servant* readers. We well know about the modernizing restructuring of Princeton Theological Seminary and Machen's subsequent establishment of Westminster Theological Seminary. We know the story of how Dr. Machen's involvement with the Independent Board of Foreign Missions led to his own suspension from his ministry in the Presbyterian Church in the USA (PCUSA), his withdrawal from that body, and his participation in the founding of that fellowship that has become the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC). We have adopted these events as our own history almost as fervently as we have adopted the Westminster Standards.

What our brother, the Rev. Brian L. De Jong, provides us with in *Standing Against Tyranny* is an unfamiliar, but parallel, account of the OPC's origin, through a study of the life of Arthur F. Perkins, a founding member of that new church and the first moderator of its Presbytery of Wisconsin. Here we find the concurrence of corroborating testimony about the real issues of the day, particularly as it pertains to the fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the 1920s and 1930s in Presbyterian Wisconsin. Many have already heard the testimony from the Northeast. De Jong has now provided us with a confirming report from the Midwest.

The uniqueness of this work's contribution to our understanding of that era is more than geographical, however. For through the life of Arthur Perkins we have the opportunity to see the spiritual, theological, and ecclesiastical conflict of his day from the perspective of one who stood shoulder-to-shoulder with J. Gresham Machen in his vigorous fight for the faith, while being a very different sort of man, something the author rightly emphasizes:

Indeed, two more dissimilar men you could not find. One a seminary professor, the other a small-town pastor. The one grew up in Baltimore in comfortable circumstances. The other came from a farm in Wisconsin, living on modest means. One studied at Princeton and was covenantal, the other graduated from the Moody Bible Institute and was a Dispensationalist. One was a lifelong bachelor, the other was married with five children. The one was a scholar with an international reputation, the other was largely unknown outside of Central Wisconsin. One traveled

extensively in Europe, the other rarely left his home state. Machen and Perkins were vastly different men, yet a shared faith in Christ united them in deep friendship. The abuse they each suffered for resisting modernism drew them even closer together. (228–29)

Both men also died in unity, not only because they passed into glory three days apart from one another, but also because they ended their earthly lives as persecuted soldiers of the cross, bearing the cost of their faith, in part, in bodily weakness and affliction.

This definitive record of the life and legacy of Arthur Franklin Perkins (1887–1936) reveals him to be a humble man of modest means and education, but also one of vibrant Christian faith and of great zeal for the salvation of sinners and the growth of the Presbyterian Church in Wisconsin. Having been an unconverted Wisconsin farmer for over ten years, Perkins came to saving faith in Christ around age twenty-eight and the following year sold his two farms so that he might focus on being prepared for labor in full time Christian service. He was trained at Moody Bible Institute and was ordained as a minister of the gospel in the PCUSA in 1922 at the age of thirty-four. He did not graduate from Moody for another three years but served multiple Presbyterian churches in Wisconsin during that time. After six years of pastoral ministry, Perkins was hired as the Field Director of the Winnebago Presbytery of the PCUSA, a role that was much like that of an OPC Regional Home Missionary.

Although he was not anywhere near as well-trained or as theologically educated as the average minister in our communions today, that didn't stop the Spirit of God from making Perkins into a positive force for the gospel throughout his state. His labors in the area of home missions and church planting are impressive and inspiring. In his first four years as Field Director, Perkins's average month of ministry included "15 sermons . . . 58 pastoral calls . . . 6 baptisms . . . 3 personal spiritual interviews . . . over 5 session meetings . . . 3 congregational meetings . . . 11 new members. . . [and] an average of 644 miles" (34–35) travelled for ministry purposes. After he completed his seven years in that position, he reported, "I have received 764 members into these churches or an average of 108 each year . . . I have seen 1179 profess Christ, have baptized 441 and have traveled 171,839 miles" (p.34). Surely, in spite of his deficiencies, Arthur Perkins was mightily used by the living God in his day. I personally find Reverend Perkins's testimony to be a great encouragement to my own persistence in gospel ministry, being myself a man with feet of clay and with temptations to insecurity regularly lying close at hand. Every gospel minister needs the exhortation which a testimony like Arthur Perkins's provides in a concrete fashion—that we might abide contentedly with God's ordinary way of making his power perfect in our weaknesses (2 Cor. 12:9).

Perhaps it was, in part, this evangelistic power that God displayed through Arthur Perkins, a jar of clay, which occasioned the fire he drew from a number of his fellow presbyters. His enemies, to a man, all embraced the modernism of the day, a movement that Machen condemned as "not only . . . a different religion from Christianity but [one that] belongs in a totally different class of religions."<sup>1</sup>

De Jong helps us see how the conflict between Reverend Perkins and the modernists within the PCUSA was fundamentally over spiritual differences of doctrine, particularly in ecclesiology. However, the official cause of Perkins's persecution and eventual

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<sup>1</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923; repr.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 6.

suspension from the ministry centered around Perkins's involvement in the distinctly orthodox ministry of Crescent Lake Bible Camp, which Perkins cofounded. Also included were the baseless allegations that Perkins had used his position as Field Director to create "a Presbytery within the Presbytery, creating a political group within the Presbytery, sowing disunion and division and suspicion toward the other camps" (179). Perkins's persecution over his involvement with the Crescent Lake Bible Camp runs very much in sync with the persecution Machen endured over his involvement with the Independent Board of Foreign Missions, which Perkins and his congregation also gladly preferred to support. Other trying episodes, such as Perkins's lonely opposition to the ordination of a man who denied the virgin birth of Christ (96–7), also lined the path of Perkins's eventual departure from the PCUSA and entrance into the new church, now the OPC.

The author presents well the drama of Perkins's prosecution at trial, exposing the manipulative tactics of those who hijacked and abused the institutional structure of the Presbyterian church for selfish ends. Especially in this portion of the book, De Jong provides us with more than just a biography of a Presbyterian pastor. It is a window into the ongoing ecclesiastical conflict within the visible church of Christ on earth. Here we have a cautionary tale that all presbyters ought to heed, with lessons about the tyrannical abuse of church power and the vital importance of safeguarding liberty of conscience for all those within and without the church of Christ.

With its five appendices, which include a timeline of major events in Perkins's life, tributes made to Perkins by his friends, thorough outlines of eighteen of Perkins's sermons, all the extant correspondence between Perkins and Machen, as well as the full text of a number of relevant documents, this biography will serve as a useful repository of historical insights for those who desire to study this era in general, the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, the founding of the OPC, the history of Midwest Presbyterianism, or the life of J. Gresham Machen.

Of special interest to some may be the final set of letters between Perkins and Machen, in which they discuss the degree of accommodation that might be made for those holding to premillennial dispensationalism within the new denomination that these men were zealous to establish. Considering the role of premillennial dispensationalism in the OPC's division of 1937, one wonders where Perkins would have affiliated if his life had been extended. Perhaps we should plan to consider such at the centennial of the founding of the Bible Presbyterian Church in 2037.

This year, however, we celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the publication of J. Gresham Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism*, a book that has been widely read by those inside and outside of the OPC. A good number of us have Machen's other writings on our shelves as well, in addition to various works that have been written about him and his peculiar cause since his death. No doubt, if Machen was still with us today, his own shelves would be lined with many of the theological and historical books that have been published since his passing—volumes on the Reformed faith, on Presbyterians and Presbyterianism in America, and on the errors of theological liberalism within the visible church.

But I have personally become convinced that this most recent publication by our brother, Brian De Jong, would have certainly been on Machen's shelves. And I say that, not simply because I know that the author would have gladly shipped a free copy to Dr.

Machen if he were still with us, but because Machen himself indicated the value of what is contained within this book. Maybe I'm being overly presumptuous, but I do believe *Standing Against Tyranny* is a book that J. Gresham Machen would have read and encouraged others to read.

I say that because, in the correspondence between Perkins and Machen, which De Jong has provided in full, we find the following statements from Machen, written to Perkins: "Your testimony has been a blessing to very many Christian people," (221) and "you, in particular, have given us all wonderful refreshment. . . . I believe your Christian testimony will sound forth far and near—not only among the people of Wisconsin for whom you labor immediately, but also in every other place" (247).

In this biography, Reverend De Jong has made a thoroughly researched and edifying presentation of Arthur Perkins's testimony of Christian faith under trial, such that the blessing Machen personally received by that same testimony might now indeed be multiplied. By his research and writing, De Jong has taken up the noble task of sounding forth Perkins's Christian testimony, in fulfillment of Machen's expectations. For that reason alone, all those who trust the discerning perspective of J. Gresham Machen ought to seriously consider reading this new book.

The closest I can come to a critique of this work is to acknowledge that some readers may feel the author's pattern of repeatedly quoting the same original source material slows the pacing of the narrative, while a more purely chronological method of including the quoted content might have streamlined his presentation. Others, however, will look at that same use of repetition and appreciate the author's scrupulous commitment to immediately provide his readers with supporting evidence of his interpretive claims, as well as his wise use of both simple chronology and noteworthy themes to organize his writing.

This volume was a delight to read. It fed my soul and provided me with a faithful testimony of a life worth imitating in many ways. I am most thankful for the godly legacy of Arthur F. Perkins and for the way this book has enabled that legacy to be applied to my own heart. I heartily recommend it.

This book is available in multiple formats on Amazon.com, including an audio version, read by the author, on Audible. Also available are a series of seven video lectures on The Life and Legacy of Arthur Perkins as well as the preaching of four of his sermons, all delivered by the author. Those videos can be found on *The Perkins Study Center*, available at [www.graceopcsheboygan.com](http://www.graceopcsheboygan.com).

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